

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON OF GOD (Part 2)

The question Jesus posed to his disciples, “Who do you say that I am” (Matthew 16:15), has been revamped in our day. Due to the hermeneutic of self-centeredness, our narcissistic culture has been seduced into believing the lie that God is some cosmic bellhop eager to do our bidding, so we effectively put Jesus’ question this way, “Who would you like me to be?” Because our hearts are, in Calvin’s words, “idol factories,” we should recognize that this tendency is not restricted to theological liberals and the like. My friend David Wells has noted that, “The shape which our Christology assumes is determined by the presupposition and operating assumptions with which we start.”² If we begin, for instance, with the assumption that Jesus’ first concern is my personal happiness (as I define happiness), then this will serve as a filter in how I read the Bible. Due to the widespread influence of the Health and Wealth preachers that crowd the airwaves of so-called “Christian television,” this is exactly how Jesus is portrayed. People treat the Bible like a road map to personal fulfillment or like a manual for fixing life’s problems. In fact, given the therapeutic mindset that has gained ascendancy in our culture, even our evangelical churches can find themselves culturally conditioned to read the Bible through a paradigm that is quite foreign to historic Christianity. This helps to explain how people today can defend decidedly unbiblical notions (i.e., homosexuality is simply an alternative lifestyle) by selectively appealing to the Bible and the re-interpreting everything through that particular grid. In order to properly answer Jesus’ question in Matthew 16:15, we must first ask the *right* question. Interpretations of Jesus are fraught with bias. He’s a powerful figure whom people want on their sides – and they’re willing to recreate him in their image to enlist his support. Animal rights activists imagine a vegetarian Jesus. New Agers make him an example of finding the god within. And radical feminists strip him of divinity so that Christianity doesn’t appear sexist. “Frankly, it’s hard to escape the feeling that our culture has taken Jesus’ question *Who do you say that I am?* and changed it to *Who do you want me to be?*”³

I. **THE TESTIMONY TO THE SON.**

- A. ***The character of the Son*** (John 3:31). Once again it is difficult to determine the exact identification of the speaker of the words of verses 31-36. It is the opinion of some that the speaker is our Lord, and others affirm that John the Apostle is the author of them.⁴ Many commentators hold that the words from here to the end of the chapter cannot have been spoken by the Baptist. They regard especially the contents of 3:34,

35, too advanced to be ascribed to him. But it is not at all clear that one who had seen and heard what is recorded in 1:32; Mark 1:9-11 (cf. Luke 3:21, 22) would not have been able to utter that is found in 3:34, 35.⁵ Leon Morris concurs, "There is also the difficulty of seeing how the Baptist could say, *no man receiveth his witness* (v. 32) in the very speech in which he is answering the affirmation that *all men come to him* (v. 26.)"⁶ But then, two pages later, he says, "*No man* is not to be taken literally, as the very next verse shows."⁷ Perhaps it is best to take the words of the paragraph to be the continuation of the testimony of John the Baptist. At any rate, whatever view is taken the words constitute a magnificent affirmation of the Son's preeminent glory, as the repeated use of the phrase "above all" shows. It is impressive in its impact on the reader. The application of the expression, "He who comes from above," to Christ is also impressive. Since John's purpose in writing the gospel is to show that Jesus is Christ, the use of the expression, "He who comes from above," underlines the heavenly origin of the Son of God and, thus, His qualifications for Messiahship. The twofold repetition of the idea emphasizes the unique origin of the Son. "He is absolutely preeminent," Morris says.⁸ Is it not interesting to reflect upon the fact that the Baptist must have often recited the *Shema Israel*, the fundamental text on the unity of God, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4)? And yet he found no difficulty in saying that the Lord Jesus was one who came "from above," having a heavenly origin. The emergence of the completed doctrine of the Trinity was no problem for the Baptist. He thought of Jesus as celestial and of himself as terrestrial.⁹

- II. **THE SON OF GOD WAS RECOGNIZED.** Vos collected a massive testimony regarding the ascription of the title "Son of God," which was attested by a large variety of individuals in the Gospel record. Jesus is called the Son of God in the Synoptic Gospels by the following speakers: Satan and the demons; his enemies of the Jewish opposition; the disciples; the Angel at the annunciation according to Luke; the voice from heaven at the baptism and the transfiguration. The demons employing the title thereby express proximately their knowledge that Jesus is the Messiah. Hence they use the address interchangeably with that of "the Holy One of God," Mk. 1:24; Lk. 4:34. It should not be overlooked, however, that in their mouths the content of the title necessarily exceeds that of a purely natural being. Wrede, as we had occasion to notice before, has acutely observed that the fact of the demons recognizing his character *first* implies the supernaturalness of this character. What the demons display is not mere inferential knowledge gathered from observation of Jesus' procedure and acts, for in that case not they, but the disciples associated with Him, ought to have been the first observers. The knowledge is of an intuitive, supernatural kind. Because they are themselves supernatural spirits, they "scent," according to the realistic description of Wrede, the supernatural in Jesus. It is a case of spirit recognizing spirit. Hence we are told in Mk. 3:11: "And the unclean spirits, whensoever they beheld him, fell down before him, and cried, saying, thou art the Son of God." An equally illuminating incident is that recorded in Mk 5:6: "And when he saw Jesus from afar, he ran and prostrated himself, and, crying out with a loud voice, he says, "What have I to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of the Most High God?" (cp. The parallel passage in Lk. 8:28). It is true, the verbs here describing the acts of the demons are not exclusively used of religious veneration. They cannot, without more, be turned into an argument in

favor of recognition by the demons of the Deity of Jesus. Matt. 2:2, 8, 11; 18:26; Mk. 15:19, show that the acts might apply, where an acknowledgement of royal dignity is involved. But even in such cases the line between a sub-religious and a religious act should not be too sharply drawn, because deification of rulers prevailed. The two words have also a specifically religious meaning in which they express prostration before a higher supernatural power. The latter is the word used by Jesus in his answer to Satan: "It is written, thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and him alone shalt thou serve." And there can be little doubt but the act of the demons partook of this nature: it was a recognition of his lordship and power in the world of spirits. It anticipated that of which Paul speaks in Philippians, that at the naming of the name of Jesus every knee shall be made to bow of those under the earth no less than of those in heaven and on earth. It does not necessarily follow from this that the demons recognized by such a prostration the absolute Deity of our Lord. They might not have been over-particular in the matter of paying religious homage to one regarded of a lower rank than the Highest God, cp. Mk. 5:7, where the demon says to Jesus: "I conjure thee by God." But it is certain that they are represented as divining something supernatural in Jesus' Person. Some have even thought that the demons are meant by Mark to represent pagan deities. This would mean that these gods recognized Jesus' superiority to themselves and acknowledged Him to be the true God."¹⁰

III. **THE LOGICAL CONCLUSION.**

- A. **For the believer: life** (John 3:36a). The one who believes in the Son (notice the absolute sense of the term. Men are sons, but He is the Son) has eternal life. "Eternal life," said Tenney, "is a present possession, not a reward bestowed at the gates of death."¹¹
- B. **For the disobeyer: wrath** (John 3:36b-c). One might have expected John to say, "but he who does not believe the Son," but instead he says, "But he who does not obey the Son." Bishop Ryle made this observation: "The Greek word here rendered *believeth not* is quite different from the one translated *believeth* at the beginning of the verse. It means something much stronger than *not trusting*. It would be more literally rendered, *He that does not obey or is disobedient to*. It is the same word so rendered in Rom. 2:8, 10:21; 1 Pet. 2:8, 3:1-20."¹² The man who believes does exercise the obedience of faith, while the one who does not believe does not in fact obey with the obedience of faith. Those who believe obey; those who do not disobey (cf Romans 1:5, 16:26, 10:16 [see the AV]). Faith for John, as for the apostles and the others, is a faith that issues action. Faith and conduct are necessarily linked in biblical teaching, but it must be emphasized that they are linked in God's thought and purpose. It is possible that we, men, may not see the evidence of faith in a true believer. It is not in men to discern the difference between the truth and the false in the same way that God can and does. And yet, it is the responsibility of elders to act on the basis of evidence in the disciplining of the saints. It is well to remember, however, that they are not infallible in their judgments. Why should the unbeliever look forward to wrath? An answer given in 1 John 5:10 (cf. John 5:23, 15:23). He has made God a liar. The subject of the wrath of God is very uncongenial to moderns, but it is found in the Word of God. The refusal to heed the truth leads inevitably to a mutilated Bible, as

well as to a concept of God that is immoral, for we then have a God who does not feel it necessary to do anything about moral evil. Further, why should anyone be concerned about salvation? “Unless we are saved from peril there is no meaning in salvation,” Morris contends.¹³

CONCLUSION: If Christ were not the only-begotten Son of God, and if both Scripture and the confession erred in calling him thus, we would not only treat him differently but also his work. . . . We hold that the person and work of Christ are inextricably connected. The significance of Christ’s work can only be understood when it is seen as the work of this very person. The significance of the person of Christ is manifested in all of his work. The question that Jesus once asked of his disciples may not be left unanswered: *But whom say ye that I am?* Apostles and evangelists have given the answer that we owe to God’s revelation: *Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God* (Matt. 16:15-16). The church of Christ may not express it differently. The church says so in faith guided by the Word of God.¹⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. 1, Ch. V., sec. 19.

² D. F. Wells, *The Person of Christ* (IVP, 1984), p. 21.

³ R. M. Bowman, Jr. & J. E. Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus In His Place: The Case For The Deity of Christ* (Kregel, 2007), p. 17.

⁴ Cf. W. Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Baker, 1988), p. 149.

⁵ L. Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 243.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 245.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ F. Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (rpt. Zondervan, 1964), p. 90.

¹⁰ G. Vos, *The Self-Disclosure of Jesus* (George H. Doran Co., 1926), p. 171.

¹¹ M. C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Eerdmans, 1948), p. 91.

¹² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts On The Gospels: John 1:1-10:9* (rpt. Zondervan, 1952), p. 190.

¹³ Morris, p. 250.

¹⁴ J. Von Genderen and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (P&R, 208), p. 440.